To Carl Werner

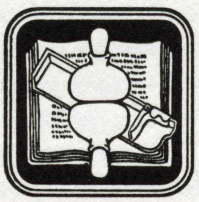
INSCRIBED

Sincerely and with
affection,
Ben Hur Lampman

8/17/34

THE TRAMP PRINTER

SOMETIME JOURNEYMAN
of
THE LITTLE HOME-TOWN PAPERS
IN DAYS THAT COME
NO MORE



By
BEN HUR LAMPMAN

Published by the METROPOLITAN PRESS, *Portland, Oregon*
With the CRAFTSMAN SYNDICATE *Cooperating*
1934

Copyrighted, 1934, by Ben Hur Lampman
Printed in U. S. A.

FOREWORD

By ELBERT BEDE

THE TRAMP PRINTER, so graphically described in this volume, flourished in the days before typesetting machines, automatic presses and efficiency experts. When conditions became inimical to his existence he quietly faded from the picture, which was typical of him, for I do not recollect one who was content to remain more than a few weeks on one job. He was, even in his heyday, always fading away, often at the most inopportune moments. If any have gotten to heaven they probably make life miserable for St. Peter, begging permission to spend every other month in the other place.

This volume should interest those not of the craft, and those recently of the craft, because of being an accurate and entertaining description of a unique species that is no more. To those of us who knew the typical tramp printer in his native habitat—who can speak familiarly of Baldy Brown, Shorty Nolan or others of the tourists—there is brought vividly to mind the old-time country printshop, without which this tramp printer never would have come into being.

Usually the building was a rickety one, probably because the editor couldn't pay rent for a better one. If the shop was on the second floor, the stairs probably were outside and also were rickety. As though it were yesterday we see the old Washington handpress, the oil lamps, the 7x11 Pearl footpower jobber. There was, of

course, the ancient and disreputable office towel, to which Mr. Lampman feelingly refers in the following pages, that stood its position more sturdily almost than some of the improvised tables that supported imposing stones. Running water was unknown, and the water which was provided was used over and over again for ablutionary purposes until it acquired a soupy consistency.

Those were the good old days, to which we do not wish to return except through the pages of a delightful book such as this—to which we can give an hour while listening to the clack of the automatic and dropping of the mats of the typesetting machine.

Those of us who were of the old school of country printers and editors, who have been permitted to linger merely because we have mended some of our ways, can testify that there is no exaggeration in any of the incidents that follow, unless it be that of the tramp printer who eschewed liquor. Some of the species were scholarly, most of them had a certain dignity of carriage despite soiled and disarranged habiliment, all had pride in their art; but those I knew would have felt they had dishonored their profession had they refused a cheering cup. They were journeymen at the bar as well as at the typestand.

In this volume there has been preserved for posterity, in a masterly and sympathetic manner, a species almost as extinct as the dodo and dinosaur. It is well that this has been done now by a contemporary writer, for future generations could not evolve a life history of the tramp printer by exhuming his bones, wiring them together and making deductions from the recreated skeleton.

We who knew the tramp printer of the old-time country printshop, especially those of us who, as apprentices, stood in awe of his typographical superiority, are grateful to Mr. Lampman for this contribution to recorded history of the nation.

He bit off—no, *wrenched* is the word—a cheek-bulging chew of tobacco, chose a composing stick, settled the copy before him.

Chapter I

COMING OF THE TRAMP PRINTER

LATE in the sultry prairie afternoon of that bygone day—when horseflies were the faunal familiars of every summer windowpane—a single passenger dropped jauntily from an empty grain car of the local freight, and made his insouciant way across the tracks to Main Street. He did not slouch as a vagrant might. There was destination in his sauntering progress. You might have said that yonder was one who had come home from his travels.

He turned west at Stebbins' feed store, and so up Maple Street toward the *Culver County Shield* office—Job Printing Neatly Done—and without least hesitation entered the shadowy doorway. At a stride he had quitted the brazen brilliancy of the day for a tepid semi-gloom that seemed to be compounded of equal parts of printer's ink, sour paste

and an acrid metallic grime. Central on the long pine table before him a big yellow tomcat opened great golden cynic eyes and yawned.

' ' ' '

The editor of the *Shield*, embowered in scattered exchange newspapers, was seated at a smaller desk toward the rear of the room—to which no more than a minimum of weary and frustrated sunlight might penetrate. There was a green celluloid visor perched over the left editorial eye, and the forearms of the journalist (ye scribe to his contemporaries) were clad in black sateen sleeve protectors. His discarded cuffs were parked beside the mucilage pot. A pencil slurred softly. The editor did not look up from his labors. The pencil raced to the end of its page, with a cross for a period and a bold "30" beneath the paragraph in token of finis. Not until then did the editor glance at the man from the freight car, and this as the sheet of copy was spiked on its spindle.

"Why, hello, Jim," said the editor.

"Hello, Mr. Tucker," answered the new arrival. "How about it?"

The editor feigned to ponder the question deeply, tilting his chair to the wall—while the smudged and aproned apprentice, who had been washing rollers in the pressroom, stood at that gloomier

doorway, a shade out of shadow, in tranced admiration. But the eyes of the boy were not for Mr. Tucker. Nor was his admiration innocent of humor. There was that in the look which bore witness to an unanticipated gladness entering his life. The editorial chair legs came positively to the floor.

"We been pretty busy, and that's a fact," said the editor. "I guess we could use you for a couple days, Jim, mighty handy."

' ' ' '

But Jim already had divested himself of his coat. He draped its shabbiness with careful precision on a nail by the type cases and rolled up his shirtsleeves. His green derby once had been black, and there were interesting continental and insular splotches of grease upon it. He did not remove the derby. The composing rule that Jim fished from his pocket had the argent gleam of long usage. He detached the sheet of copy paper from its spindle, opened and snapped a spectacle case and had the spectacles perched in what seemed one continuous and fluent gesture. He bit off—no, *wrenched* is the word—a cheek-bulging chew of tobacco, chose a composing stick, settled the copy before him on a type rack and filled the warm silence with a rhythmic, brisk clicking. The types, that make thrones to totter and bring light unto darkness, were shaping themselves

into this simple chronicle of the early American prairie:

> Ole Jacobson drove down to Ridgeville and Sundayed there again for the fifth time hand-running. What's the attraction, Ole? Perhaps some of the Ridgeville girls could tell us.

The Tramp Printer had returned.

* * * *

There was a wonder of far adventure about it, to such as were not often out of the county nor ever far from its borders, but it was the expected. For the tramp printers nearly always returned. Leisurely, whimsically and with more than a trace of condescension these strolling journeymen of the types—these inheritors of the dingy, charmed lamp of literacy—emerged from the vague, interesting geography of an exterior world, mystic with many strange, far-place names, and took their peripatetic stances before the type racks of the *Shield* office. And leisurely they departed, at their own whims, to disappear by blind baggage or grain car in the easy, golden, unperturbed distances of the times. The times of the horsefly and good duck-shooting.

The return of the tramp printer was always an event in the drowsy town where the *Shield* was published. Word passed from general store to postoffice, from postoffice to poolhall, from poolhall to

saloon, up and down the wooden sidewalked street where the farm teams pitted the roadway with their heavy hooves—"That tramp printer's back in town again." When people said or heard this they smiled one at another, as the apprentice had smiled in the *Shield* office. It was traditional that one should smile when a tramp printer returned. Even in life such men were legendary. And, also, to smile was somehow to discount the conscious disadvantage of never having been far from Culver County. Despite their casual dinginess, their usual appearance of having slept very frequently in their clothes, the tramp printers were manifestly men of the world. They were timeless troubadours with a new story about the two traveling men in lieu of song. And they were bacchanal to wondrous degree. They were filled with strange oaths, classic quotation, and in their vest pockets were Rabelaisian verses. They were filled with an ebullient, innocent wickedness, generally speaking; but most of them were wholly willing to be filled with cheap bar whisky, too. Such men are epochal.

, , , ,

Typographical vagrants of Jim's kidney were commonly orbital in their wanderings. Their reappearances could be calculated with something that approximated accuracy, for throughout the state,

or two states, or three, it might be, they possessed journalistic patrons in scores of small towns — and thus they made their circuits with most methodical fidelity. A week or so at the cases of the *Culver County Shield* office and Jim would be away to Prairie Center, there to work a while for Old Man Rogers of the *Blade*. And so into remote distance, over his circuit — into far places, yet ever returning. A fixed orbit. But others, disdaining utterly the shackles of time and place, were like wandering comets that appear briefly out of the unknown, tarry, and return no more. An unwritten ordinance of the craft, to which all country editors submitted without protest, was that the tramp printer never should be refused a day at the cases or the job press, with a cot in the back room.

Before the advent of the linotype in little, drowsy country towns. Before the old Washington hand press had disappeared from the American scene. Before the automobile had ceased to frighten the horses. Before the Wright boys claimed they had flown a strange contraption at Kittyhawk. Before the San Francisco earthquake. Before the War.

CHAPTER II

TOM FORD: PRIEST TO BEAUTY

TOM FORD was of the orbital persuasion—lean, frail, bent-shouldered Tom, with a feminine gentleness of blue gaze and a rare gift for the composition of letterheads and display advertisements. Those of his own craft used to style poor Tom a most "artistic" printer, which was to say that he was one who was priest to beauty in his daily work, and sorrowed for his own unworthiness, it may well have been, and found the deceitful anodyne of drink.

Tom Ford, tramp printer, smiling shyly at the doorway, as though abashed to enter the familiar composing room again, as though uncertain of his welcome. Tom, with his fewness of words, his acolyte look, his pungently disreputable garments, and his swiftly unhurried craftsmanship.

No deacon of the church had less to do with whisky than Tom Ford the first week of his visit. He was a silent, efficient printer, with an untiring capacity for work and the strange, semi-occult gift of causing those who worked beside him to feel happily companioned. The most disorderly of composing rooms, cluttered with standing, half-pied type that should have been in the depleted cases, came soon to a primness of order when Tom worked there. He took this task in his stride, this setting of things to rights, and without comment, nor did the current duties of the printing plant suffer from neglect. These, too, were discharged as never before. Orders for job printing were filled with a promptness to which the astonished patrons had not been accustomed. The weekly issue was in the mails on time, and each page of the newspaper somehow had a different and a more competent look — because Tom had worked on them all, and had tended the superannuated news press.

* * * *

This was a state of affairs much too good to be true; yes, far too idyllic to last. Desire was burgeoning in Tom like any jimson weed, and its rank flowers, redolent of the dram cup, as the temperance lecturers of the period were wont to phrase three fingers of the old creature, slowly unfolded

before the inner vision of his vaguely seraphic gaze. Tom would be about due. The editor knew it. The printer's devil, to whom the haunted tramp printer was a figure of romance, knew it, also. And Tom had learned to know this doomed coming long before. When his thirst came upon him Tom asked only that the weekly issue should have been mailed. Toward this obligation he manifested a fidelity that never faltered. But, the paper being out, no other task might then restrain him. His time was come.

Tom Ford, when he was "on it again," was decidedly unpleasing. To even the most hardened contemplation. He drank with the abandon of the sot—with a most impetuous desire that bordered on the obscene—thirstily, gulpingly, to swift oblivion. He embraced drunkenness as a bride. He drank wherever whisky was to be had, and, if left to his own choice in the matter, fell sprawling on the spot. In course of time he would rise, dazed but indomitable, to drink again. But such was the usual affection for him that commonly he was borne, at head and heels, when vanquished, to the back room of the printing office and there deposited with something of impatience. It was necessary, so he often said—and far more often demonstrated—for Tom to achieve unconsciousness not less than three times before his madness departed.

Penitent? Not a bit of it. The trembling, haggard caricature that tottered slowly into the composing room, when desire was sated, evinced an abundance of hangover but nothing of heartache. Fumbling his way to the imposing stone, Tom would extend an uncertain hand toward the gasoline bottle. He was observed by awe-stricken and incredulous eyes to lift this to his lips and gulp heavily of its searing contents. Nor would he, when momentarily stayed from his purpose, consent to the substitution of any alcoholic refreshment. His eye-opener, when coming "off it," was invariably a stout snifter of gasoline.

"But why, Tom?" one might ask. "It's poison."

Tom would replace the bottle with perhaps the trace of a gesture. Indeed, there may have been something of bravado in it all. He would shake himself weakly, shudderingly, whereat the visible shame of his debauch—the shame he by no means felt—would somehow decrease, as mist fades from a blurred window.

"Why not?" he would parry. "She does her stuff. Gasoline warms me down here."

"But why not whisky, Tom? A good stiff slug, just to taper off on?"

"I'm off the whisky," Tom would reply with great firmness. Then, veering humorously, "Till the next time."

"Tom, why don't you quit drinking?"

"Well, why don't you peddle fish?"

This interchange was mutually expected, and it never varied by more than an immaterial word or so. It led directly, as Tom intended, to the masterly brief counter-offensive by which he silenced his well-meaning critics. To his one jest. To the gist of his hopeless philosophy. Why does not one peddle fish, indeed? There was always a meditative silence, and in that silence Tom would shuffle back to the type racks to become the acolyte once more. He would be leaving next day or the day after. He'd be getting along to another town, another country print shop, another week or ten days of most irreproachable craftsmanship—and another relapse. The editor knew it. Everybody that knew Tom was well aware of it. And Tom knew himself better than any. He would take his leave grinning shyly, looking boyishly backward, and the mellow, mysterious distance would swallow him up like another Marco Polo. He would not be back for a year. For that was how it was with Tom Ford.

Chapter III

HOW BIG JOHN FIXED THE PRESS

SAY what you will for erudition and the mental and moral ascendancy of brain over brawn, the truth remains that enormous physical strength continues to command the general envy. Deeply implanted in most men, though they would be instant to deny its existence, is the frustrated yearning to be yet another Terrible Turk. Another Primo Carnera. We may smile at the big-muscle boys, as someone has styled them, but our mirth is not without wryness. For always it seems to us, inwardly, that somehow they possess a heritage we must have lost somewhere. As Big John McAllister possessed it.

Big John was often and not ineptly saluted as "Jumbo," and he liked it well. It nurtured, the word did, the twelve-year-old egotism that had its residence in the vast, column-thighed, great-shoul-

dered, bull-headed bulk of one of the oddest of all tramp printers. Big John was not only a printer, but a pressman, and it was to this latter calling he preferred to address himself. He scorned the type cases when there was a press to be tinkered, and such was the impressive vital force of Big John, a force as evident and unreasoning as that of some bull bison with lowered head, that none said him nay. And, too, there was no skill in country towns for the repairing of presses. Printers confessed their own futility. The blacksmith, when there was a breakdown, wrought as a blacksmith might—but the village Tubal Cain was manifestly not a pressman. When Jumbo loomed hugely out of distance and the dusty floor quaked to his proboscidian tread there was work ready to his hand. Indeed, he made no question of it.

Advancing directly to the news press—it may have been that sturdy and reliable antique known as the Country Campbell—and disdaining answer to a word of greeting—Big John laid violent, huge hands upon it. The unhappy mechanism, ponderous after its own fashion as Jumbo himself, fairly jittered as he shook it contemptuously. He dropped to his knees and peered under the press bed. He lay recumbent and dragged himself, with Homeric gruntings, beneath the press, to consider the prob-

lem of how such a ruin, for so he esteemed it, could survive even a single revolution of its cylinder. He emerged to brood, cave-browed, over the inky rollers. And with a loud, roaring oath that attained to the ultimate scorn, Jumbo divested himself of his coat. The coat clanked as he tossed it aside—but that is another story.

"Where in the hell is your wrenches?" shouted the gigantic pressman.

The effect of the preliminaries was to create in those present a curious blend of amusement and terror. A droll, cataclysmic doom seemed to impend were the wrenches not forthcoming. Where in the deuce could they be? Hither. Yonder. Under the torn litter of paper. Everybody scurried to find and supply the missing wrenches.

"Does she need any fixing, Jim?" This timidly. "She's been running fairly well."

"Does she need fixing? It's a wonder she's held together this long, and that's what. Damn' farmers. Hay-tossers, I call 'em. She's junk, that's what she is. Where's them wrenches!"

In those days, when social elegance was a flourishing art, it was considered good form to laugh cheerily at being identified, by Big John (Jumbo) McAllister, as a farmer, or, as he so engagingly phrased it, a hay-tosser.

All of a blond Neanderthal glower, Big John, wrench in hand and supplementary wrenches protruding from his pants pockets, fell tremendously upon the hapless Country Campbell. Midway of his labors, which to then had been voiceless, and always when the impressive mass of him was fully wedged beneath the press, Jumbo would bellow his command for a mickey. The argot of early former times, the plain and homely speech of the people, is fated to disuse and obsolescence. But in that enchanted yesterday a mickey was a half-pint flask of whisky, and sequentially a half-pint of whisky was just a moderate drink for Big John. His employers engaged in no debate with him. They were brisk to do his bidding. Measured in this term, it took three mickeys to overhaul the Country Campbell. And by that time Jumbo, in a whole-hearted, inoffensive manner, and far from being intoxicated, was bellowing sundry snatches of somewhat ribald song. Ink-smeared, colossal and in genial mood, Big John would circle the news press, touching it here or there with fond, huge hands—and beaming his affection.

"She'll run like an asterisked sewing machine now," he said, "though she'll be in one hell of a shape by the time I get round again. Well, call it two bucks, and you're lucky."

It has been told that Big John's coat clanked when he took it off. And it clanked again when he drew it on. Its two wide side pockets sagged, and well they might. Now Big John would smile, with the virtue of a task accomplished, plus three mickeys, and thrust his hand into a pocket, drawing forth such a horseshoe as the fashionable Percherons wear. A heavy jewel of horseshoes. A pearl. A tropheal horseshoe fit to nail above the village blacksmith's door.

"You've never seen nothing like this before," said Big John, slowly gripping the two prongs in his big knobby fists. "But you've never seen Big John McAllister, neither. Keep an eye on me, Jack." (They were all Jack to Big John.) Effortlessly, almost, so it seemed, the right forearm straightened, while the left drew back; the right fist swerved strongly downward, as a laboring piston might, while the left ascended. "Ah!" said Big John. His massive shoulders slouched once more. But the latest fashion in draft-horse footwear had become a crude capital "S" in tortured iron.

"Little souvenir of Big John," he laughed. "Take her, Jack."

With the deliberation of a conjurer making ready for his act, Big John produced a red bandana handkerchief and a veritable whopper of bridge-spikes,

a super-nail of glistening tough metal, as great in girth as an average finger. He swathed that impressive hardware tenderly in the bandana, and gripped it with his knotted hands.

"You'll never see the likes again, Jack," quoth Big John McAllister, and inward, slowly inward, turned the broad knuckles. They met. "Ah!" said Big John McAllister. There was a pulse at his temple. Almost daintily he removed the bandana, and flipped it downward. The bridge spike, such as brawny laborers drive with sledges, was a gleaming letter "U". Another little souvenir of Big John the tramp printer-pressman.

His cyclopean strength, so Jumbo was happy to explain, arose from a uniqueness of physical structure, common to all his people on his mother's side. They were different. All his ma's folks. Chosen. Set apart. The lesser breeds, that had not this providential peculiarity, could never hope to tie horseshoes into pretzels, nor otherwise to reshape the lusty iron by a mere laying on of hands.

"It's being double-j'inted that does it," Big John explained with becoming modesty. "Look." He bared his wrist. His statement, to a mere layman, seemed substantiated. "Double j'ints at me wrists, double at me ankles, too. All ma's people was that way, and ma herself, Jack, I'm telling you, the old

woman lifted a driving horse out the mire alone and unaided, and thought nothing of it. Well, I'll be going along down the line. But you got something to always remember Big John McAllister by."

, , , ,

Ten years later, and two thousands of miles from the *Shield* office, Big John McAllister entered another country printing plant. Still he was thewed, as Langdon Smith would have written it, "like an auroch bull"—but the bold, bovine, roving gray eyes of him had suffered change, and the stale saga of wassail was written in his puffed floridity. Like an auroch bull, let us say, grown old before his prime, and destined soon to be thrust from out the herd. He did not recognize this western small town editor as one for whom he had overhauled a Country Campbell long ago. His method of approach was as it had been. The mickeys were provided at appropriate intervals. And after an hour or so the old news press was pronounced competent to run for another year of weekly issues and auction posters.

"Maybe you never heard tell of Big John McAllister?" he said in the social interval that ensued. "There's only one of me—double-j'inted, like all ma's people. Now watch me closely, Jack."

And he bent a small spike, such as carpenters use for their heavier work—but he bent this only with

stertorous puffings and purple agony of face. There was no deftly twisted bridge spike. Nor was there any pretzeled horseshoe.

"Little souvenir of Big John," he gasped.

"But, John," responded the journalist, and sadly enough, "how about kinking a horseshoe?"

"Where do you get that stuff, Jack?" And this with an out-thrusting of gray-stubbled jaw.

"Well, you used to bend horseshoes." Sheer heroism, though ventured not without diffidence, for Big John yet was Jumbo.

"You're a damn' liar!"

' ' ' '

So they left it at that, agreeably enough, and Big John lumbered away into the golden enchantment of distance. But somehow this seemed not quite so mellow. It was tinctured perhaps with the chill, advancing shadow of twilight.

Chapter IV

THE TRAMP PRINTER MEETS A CRISIS

IT WAS then that tramp printers would recite for you, each according to his version, that mournful folk ballad of the bums, "The Girl With the Blue Velvet Band." There seemed never to be a printed copy of this maudlin epic—to which the hobo jungles of America were accustomed to emote—and it is passing strange that there was none. All tramp printers were minstrels in a manner of speaking, and they carried in their vest pockets a rich if ribald treasure-trove of questionable verses—certain of which they profanely insisted upon attributing to the authorship of James Whitcomb Riley and others to that of his almost equally beloved contemporary, 'Gene Field. Thus all country newspaper offices possessed miniature libraries, as you might say, of reprehensible song

and poem, and visiting tramp printers added to each collection, while at the same time increasing their own. But the ballad of "The Girl With the Blue Velvet Band" somehow was available only in declamation—when beer foamed in the lard pail and the paper was off the press.

> In the city of wealth, love and beauty,
> Dear old 'Frisco, I first saw the light—

There were pathos and heart interest for you, and the blasting—by feminine falsity, or frailty, as you chose—of a highly promising career as a yeggman. Tears were nigh to flowing into the tin flagon when the printer's devil, and the editor, and the barber, perhaps, and maybe a stripling or two that had come in to help fold papers, were brought face to face with the realization that woman's moral nature is at best a fragile reed. Unhappy, misfortunate hero, who "was ditched for a desperate crime", how the heart went out to him at these lines—

> One night as I stood there dreaming,
> With my face pressed close to the bars,
> I fancied I heard a girl singing,
> 'Way off in the acres of stars.

Clean as a hound's tooth and fragrant as brook-side violets and real elevating—that's what that ballad was—back there in the *Shield* office when the weekly issue was just off the press. As a ballad

it was ideal for beer — for beer and the halcyon day of the horsefly.

Your typical tramp printer was at his zenith in an emergency. He delighted to come to grips with problems that baffled the best minds of the *Shield* office. He it was who carved, out of pine lumber, an indispensable wood cut of our American eagle, with outspread wings, perched on ragged lightnings. This was his contribution to 100 per cent Americanism, *pro patria*, and to his well-beloved craft, when overnight the merchants of the town determined upon holding a Fourth of July celebration to cozen, it may have been, a little ready cash out of the canny yeomanry. For manifestly the printing of adequate posters, informing of the event, was not to be thought of without an emblem of freedom. The tramp printer supplied it, in a slow, cool frenzy of inspiration, with only his jack-knife and the pine block wherein the eagle slumbered. He worked late and for no compensation other than virtue, under a bulging brass kerosene lamp—but the posters were ready for distribution early next morning. And the eagle screamed in scarlet ink.

* * * *

This selfsame tramp printer, whose kindest fortune may be that he has drifted somewhere into the slack waters of time, saved the fair name of the

Culver County Shield in another and more gripping crisis, and again by exercise of his undisputed talent for inspired ingenuity. Thinking to replenish the empty coffers of the newspaper, for many a bill was due and the local bankers were pressing for the interest on the mortgage, the editor of the *Shield* promoted a special campaign edition in the interests of the Democratic party. And the Democrats responded, as Democrats will. Candidate after candidate agreed to purchase space for the printing of his picture, together with campaign pledges and appropriate biographical materials. All was efficient and important turmoil in the *Shield* office for a week or more, and finally the epochal edition went to press, its front page thickly bestrewn with imposing half-tone cuts. A half-tone cut, it should be explained, is a thin wafer of engraved metal nailed to a wooden block, and it conveys to the printed page the reproduced photograph. Central to the front page of the *Shield's* special edition was a half-tone depiction of the Democratic candidate for county judge.

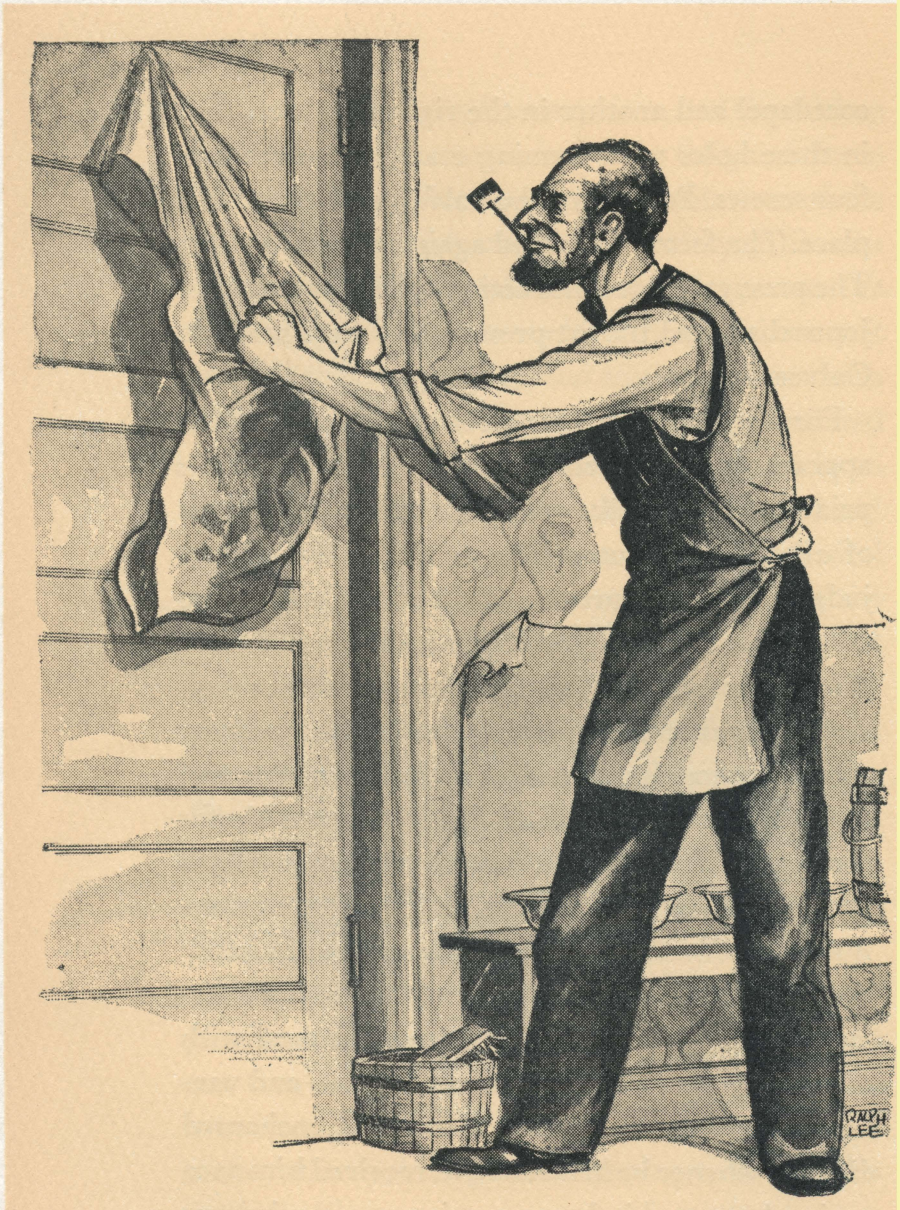
Late in the weary watches of the night, when eyes were heavy-lidded and the jaded cylinder press thumped and thundered away at its seemingly interminable task, this central half-tone—cheaply wrought, at best—broke loose from its moorings.

This were woe enough, at any time, had the mishap been at once discovered, but sheer fatigue forbade detection for perhaps some fifty revolutions of the press, during which interval the unhappy likeness of the candidate ran calamitously at large over the entire page. In the tranced horror of discovery it was felt that the great special edition was one with Nineveh and Tyre. The battered type, mutilated by that vagrant half-tone, could be replaced in an hour of labor—but the half-tone itself, warted and pummeled, seemed a total loss, though it was vital to the page, and thus to the entire issue. For the thin flange of its edge, through which the original brads had been driven, was quite torn away. The problem of securely restoring the half-tone to its wooden base loomed insurmountable. Low, tragic, forspent voices dwelt dolefully upon it. But the tramp printer, veteran of many a forlorn hope, was splendidly unperturbed. Such professional *sang-froid* was an example to his associates.

Having beaten the wayward half-tone to an approximate flatness with mallet and planer, he fished out that same jack-knife which had carved the wooden eagle. And with this knife, while he whistled tunelessly, he bored four gaping circular holes in the half-tone—one to port and another to starboard of the candidate's brave brow, one in the left

coat lapel and another in the right shoulder. And in these holes with cunning craft he countersunk four screws. Back went the half-tone to its central place. The form was locked again and on the press. The press grumbled into action. The reputations of journalism and the art preservative were saved in Culver County.

For the half-tone, apart from a slightly leprous appearance, printed admirably; and the four screws printed perfectly, likewise, to the exceeding delight of all Culver County. The candidate for county judge was vexed, unreasonably, perhaps, and all the more so when he lost the election. One would have thought, to hear his choleric comment when reluctantly he paid for the writeup, as his advertisement was professionally termed, that the four screws and the laughter they occasioned were responsible for his defeat. This position was clearly untenable, as many a well-meaning citizen undertook to explain. But in the *Shield* office there was a sense of victory even in defeat. The tramp printer, modestly wearing his laurels, drew a $5 advance, discussed with enthusiasm the projects of the morrow—and vanished as utterly as Charley Ross. The enchanted distance whence he had emerged received him once again. A non-orbital tramp printer, one who was nobly unhampered by time or place.



The blue-veined trembling hand that pulled a musket trigger at Shiloh fastened firmly upon the towel and yanked.

Chapter V

"DAD" AND THE OFFICE TOWEL

But "Dad" Givens, who fought at Shiloh and carried somewhere under his ribs a rebel bullet, was orbital to a distressingly dependable degree. The jocund month of May was dedicate, in the habitual itinerary of the veteran, to a fortnight's employment at the type cases of the *Shield* office. His advent on this predictable occasion was regarded with what might inadequately be described as mixed emotion. For though this sparse, stringy, chin-whiskered old printer was reverently regarded as a true mentor of the craft and the evidential relic of better days that return no more, he was alike temperamental as a prima donna and irascible as a captain of horse. He came when the johnny jump-ups were in full blossom along the clovered banks of Four-Mile Creek,

and at first his demeanor was that of a well-nigh saintly loving-kindness, strongly tinctured by condescension. But as the days wore on, and all too soon, this benevolence yielded to his more vigorous conviction that crass impositions were being rashly practiced upon one who had valiantly served and preserved the Union, and who was also a competent printer. And though his hapless patrons were commonly patient with him, the leave-takings of "Dad" Givens were always abrupt and in dudgeon. He was wont to declare that never again would he be so indiscreet as to bemean himself by taking service in a mere blacksmith shop—intending, of course, the *Shield* office. The door would slam irefully.

Yet nobody believed him when he renounced those long familiar ink-smeared precincts—not anybody—and, in his heart, least of all could the fine old craftsman himself have believed. Yet once to each tramp printer, in the very nature of things, must come the final tarrying, the ultimate farewell, and so it was with "Dad." Would they have forborne that last jest had they known, though heaven is witness they had warrant for it? You see, they really held him in affection. It was only that he insisted on being so difficult.

The final visit "Dad" Givens made to the *Shield* office was at the first only remarkable in that he

assured the editor there need no longer be any least worry over the paper's destinies. For he, none other than "Dad" Givens himself, was done with wandering and minded to settle down. He made no question of the acceptance of this decision, but continued with an elaboration of the terms that must be imposed. Nor were these terms onerous. A dollar or so now and then, he stipulated, for tobacco and clothing, with a room at some refined boarding house—these should suffice his simple needs. The *Shield* would rejoice in the permanent services of an incomparable printer, the swiftest compositor west of Pittsburg, while at the same time he would give freely of his advice as to the management of the business, touching also upon a sorely-needed improvement in editorial style. Clearly he had been directed by Providence to pass his declining years in these benevolent employments. And having so expressed himself, with unusual loquacity, for he was by ordinary one of your taciturn men, "Dad" Givens fell to work.

Let it be recorded in the judgment book that there was no thought to wound him by refusal, nor even by suggesting a trifle of preliminary discussion. Yet the credit on the celestial ledger should not be too lavishly awarded, for well they knew it could not last. It was so fantastically out of char-

acter. And within the first week of his retirement from the road, "Dad" Givens was his crotchety, curdled old self again, prone to mutterings and black looks, and especially addicted, in his spleen, to wrathful attacks upon the office towel. The towel played well into his hand, for it afforded him the means symbolic of his ever-increasing scorn for the *Shield* office, the editor, the apprentice and the school girl who fed the job press.

' ' ' '

It has lightly been alleged by wits and wags, though unaware how nigh their jesting came to truth, that the towel—you should say it in capitals, for it is institutional—of the usual country printing office of those times, would stand without assistance in a corner of the room, such was its incrustation of antique grime and neolithic ink. Yet this was literally sooth of the towel that used to depend stiffly from its nail above the wash stand in the *Shield* office. It would stand without assistance in the corner. They tried it with that very towel, just to see for themselves. And it would. But this was after "Dad" had slammed the door in his final leave-taking.

"Dad" Givens was a cleanly, dapper old gentleman, and candor constrains the admission that he may have had a legitimate grievance against the

office towel. It seemed unreasonable, at the time, that he should—but the years temper us all and teach tolerance when it is too late. How that familiar scene comes back to one! Having washed and rinsed his hands with great particularity, "Dad" would hold them dripping before him while he stood and glowered darkly at the forbidding towel. He must have been gratified in the curious loneliness of his savage, thespian old heart to realize that all eyes were turned expectantly upon him. His appraisal of the towel required a long, dramatic moment of suspense, and then, with one sure gesture, he would jerk the offending—and offensive—towel down and hurl it to the floor, exclaiming, "Bah!" and never another word. Thereafter he dried his hands upon a fragment of clean print paper. And twice each day, ritualistically, this occurred—at noon and at quitting time. Yet "Dad" Givens had vowed to await the trump in that same office. He had promised never to forsake them. It gave one pause.

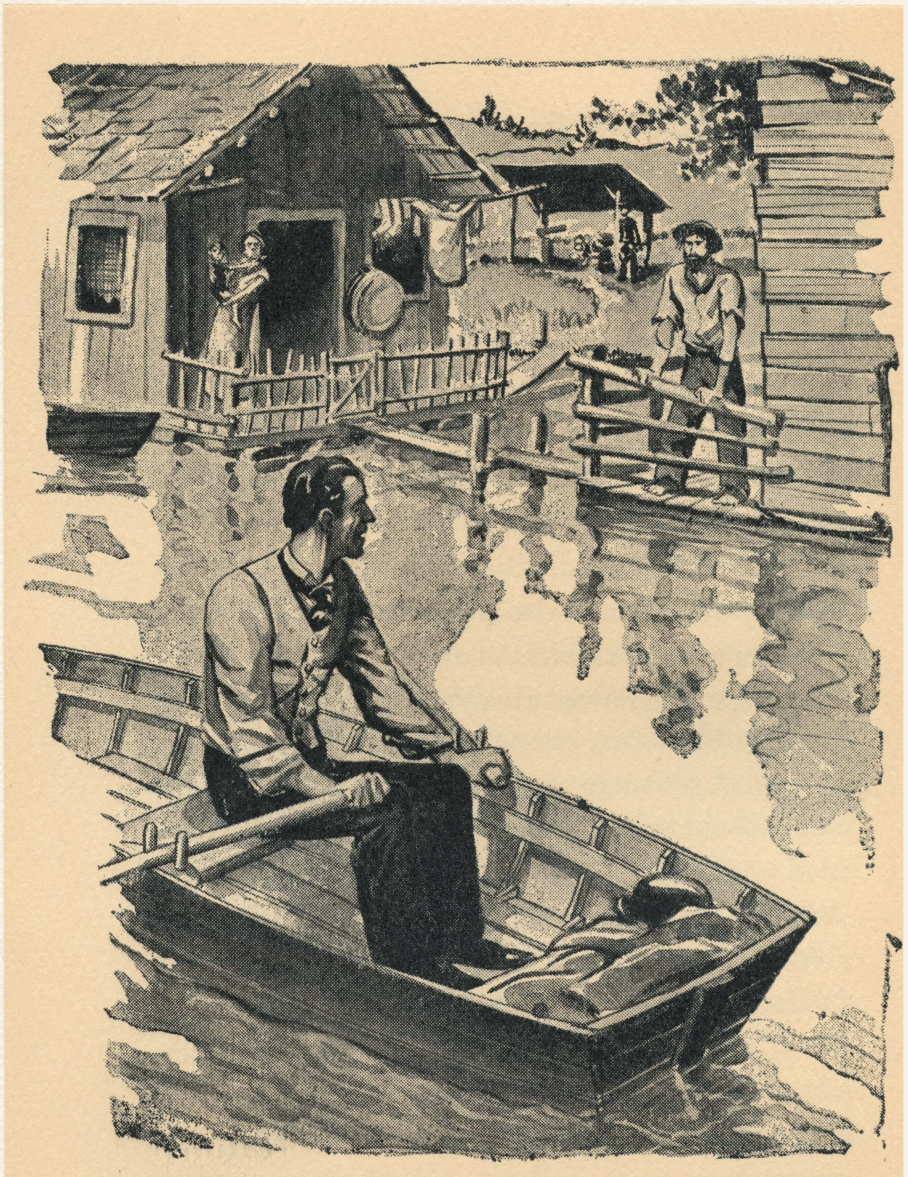
So they nailed the office towel to the wall one morning before "Dad" came wordlessly to work, and with delightful tremors of apprehension they awaited the coming of noon. The old printer had not spoken to them meantime, nor smiled, nor radiated aught except extreme distaste and disapproval.

And when he glowered before the office towel at 12 o'clock they scarce could contain themselves for somewhat malicious amusement. The blue-veined trembling hand that pulled a musket trigger at Shiloh fastened firmly upon the towel and yanked as was its wont. And yanked again, more wrathfully, and yet again. It was a stout towel and worthy of its fabricators. And it was spiked with an equally reliable nail. So for the fourth time the veteran assaulted it vainly, while his scraggy old neck flushed crimson. And then he knew.

He had no word to say, no withering enfilade in parting, but there was something pitiful about him, something tragic as ultimate defeat, as he drew on his coat and settled his hat and passed through the doorway of the *Shield* office, glancing neither to right nor left. Some tell that he ended his days in a home for old soldiers. If he did he must have been a caution to that superintendent in the interim. Others will have it that he became too rheumatic of joint to ride the freight trains, but wouldn't admit it, and that—well, it isn't what you'd call pleasant. But in the *Shield* office, where his name was green for more than several years, they knew only that "Dad" Givens left them on an afternoon in May, in such determined haste that he forgot his corncob pipe—and that he never came back. It

remained on the case for a long while, as though awaiting him, and the half-burned rank tobacco spilled into the "e" box.

Perhaps it should be said of "Dad" Givens, before his misty old name shall cease from whispering, that he was one of the few of the olden strolling printers that cared nothing whatever for the dram cup. Such men as "Dad" are sufficient unto themselves, are habitually sustained, strengthened and elevated by spiritual distillations far more potent than forty-rod. And so also it was with Mr. Cullen, who was a teetotaler without any fuss about it, but whose secret cup flowed always with the pale wine of sorrow.



Mr. Cullen . . . rowed down that river and back again, twenty or thirty miles, we'll say, maybe three or four times.

Chapter VI

OF Mr. CULLEN AND THE GRAY COMPANION

MR. CULLEN came but once to the *Shield* office, and made himself soon beloved for his gentle shyness, and was there for a fortnight, it may have been, before he shook hands mildly all around and journeyed south—or so he said—curiously like some small gray bird that has lost its song. They were busy at an extraordinary dispensation of work, and short-handed, as usual, when Mr. Cullen turned into the doorway and paused there.

"My name is Cullen," he said apologetically, "Mr. Cullen. I'm a printer. Could you put me on for a few days?"

He need not have told them he was a printer. There never was any necessity of the old-school

journeyman identifying himself. Something in the glance, though careless, that roved the shop inclusively. Something of conscious right of possession. Something, too, in the very bearing of the craftsman—something elusive and indefinable, but plain to read as the great Gothic types that were used for auction posters. Had Mr. Cullen turned away without speech, to quit their door, they should none the less have known that one of the guild had looked in upon them.

Come in, Mr. Cullen, quiet, gray, small bird of passage, primly plumed and self-effacing, gentle of speech and thought, with the hair whitening at your veined pale temples, and with your eyes that have strange dim distance in them—as though you don't quite see us. Come right along in, Mr. Cullen. The monthly proceedings of the board of county commissioners must be in type before Friday, and she'll make not less than twelve brevier columns. So come along in. You have the look of a mighty good printer; not so fast as some, perhaps, but precise and dependable. And you are just naturally bound for to set a clean proof.

* * * *

Mr. Cullen was a good printer, none better—but it wasn't for this that they soon loved him. Now and then, though not often, the Great Artificer—

perhaps only to demonstrate fondly what He can do—turns out a Mr. Cullen. And these fill the room of their presence, as Mr. Cullen filled the smirched *Shield* office, with the well-nigh palpable spirit of that singular something we call Christian charity; though a Hindoo mahatma may have it, too. Somehow Mr. Cullen, and without words, caused you to feel that this world of ours is beautiful—though sad—and that heaven is just across Jordan water. He did not speak of virtue nor of righteousness, but contented himelf with clicking methodically away at the county commissioners' proceedings, yet the usual oaths of the *Shield* office were abstained from as by an unspoken agreement, and bickerings and anger were likewise taboo. For who would brave the slow, mild, sorrowfully smiling gaze of Mr. Cullen, wherein would be no reproach, but only an utter kindliness and wondering comprehension?

Mr. Cullen carried a book of verses in his coat pocket, and the cover and pages of this book were frayed by much reading. It was a sort of classic anthology of sorrow, selected from the metrical sighings of many bards, and it was entitled "Poems of Sentiment". So soon as work was over he fell to reading from this, even while on his way to the Excelsior Restaurant, walking slowly. He read it

at his meals. Wherever you saw Mr. Cullen outside of the *Shield* office his delicate, thin old nose was certain to be in this book of verses. The editor and the apprentice took him fishing with them on a Saturday afternoon, when the work would permit, and though they lost him on the lake shore he was not far to find. Mr. Cullen, his tackle innocent of any wetting, the rod leaning in a sweetbrier bush with its line tangled, was reading underneath a friendly cottonwood. He looked up at them and shook his head.

"If you don't care," said Mr. Cullen, "I'd rather not fish. I'm having a pleasant time just reading some of these poems again."

"Well, Mr. Cullen," said the editor, who was a great fellow for fishing, "I think you'd change your mind if ever you hooked a five-pound bass."

"No, thanks, I'd rather not," said Mr. Cullen—and something stood up between those two, the country editor and the old tramp printer, something invisible but nevertheless a barrier—and the editor felt strangely that Mr. Cullen knew it was there. Knew what it was. That Mr. Cullen could see it. The editor felt that the something, if hue it had, would be gray as an evening mist on the lake. He felt like apologizing to Mr. Cullen. But in a moment the fancy passed, for Mr. Cullen once

more was only a kindly old man, with a book in his hand, beneath a cottonwood.

* * * *

They never knew about Mr. Cullen until he had gone away, having told them—and with unmistakable sincerity—that he should always think of them in friendship, and that he was grateful for the work they had given him in the *Shield* office. Presently there came an orbital tramp printer—it may have been Tom Ford—one forgets in time—but certainly it was not long after Mr. Cullen had departed—and they learned why Mr. Cullen was grayly companioned by something they never quite could see.

"Was Mr. Cullen here lately?" asked the new arrival, settling himself on a stool before the cases and tamping his pipe with natural leaf. "I thought so. He's been right ahead of me these last three months. I suppose you know about what happened to Mr. Cullen?"

They gathered around him. A long while ago—he said—it must have been twenty years and more, Mr. Cullen had a newspaper of his own somewhere Back East. A corking good plant in a live county seat town. Making bundles of money. Sitting, as the fellow says, on top of the world. And married to a handsome young woman of fine family connec-

tions in those parts. Father was a judge. They had two children, a boy and a girl, and smart as steel traps, both of 'em. It was practically all settled that Mr. Cullen should go to Congress right after the next election. And, being as they had plenty of money and everything, Mr. Cullen was glad indeed to let Mrs. Cullen and the children take a steamboat trip of a few hundred miles downriver to visit one of her married sisters. But they never came back. Some sort of accident there on the river, a boiler explosion or a collision or something, and it happened at night. You know how it is. There were just a few of them saved—but Mrs. Cullen and the two children never came home. Such things happen. Mr. Cullen went to the place and got a boat and he rowed down that river and back again, twenty or thirty miles, we'll say, maybe three or four times, stopping everywhere to inquire of the farmers and the shanty-boatmen—and watching the yellow water while he rowed. Then he returned to his model newspaper office and called in the foreman.

"You take her, Jim," he said to the foreman. "She's yours."

"Sit down, Mr. Cullen," said the foreman. "I'll get you a glass of water."

"No, I'm all right, Jim," said Mr. Cullen, "but the shop is yours from now on. I got no earthly use for it."

Then Mr. Cullen started walking up and down the country. But he never went back that way. He just walked and walked, from printshop to printshop. Anywhere but there.

At least, that's what the tramp printer said. The rest of that afternoon was quiet indeed in the office of the *Shield*.

Chapter VII

THE LEGENDRY OF TRAMP PRINTERS

THERE was a sort of legendry common to tramp printers, and it concerned itself with what seem now to have been preposterous narratives of the craft—but in which the narrators devoutly believed. Thus they would tell you, and with obvious relish, of a tramp printer known as "Old John," but as to whose surname no two narrators were agreed. Nor had they themselves beheld him. That he wandered even as they did and must surely one day visit the *Shield* office, there could be no least doubt. And with much particularity, that "Old John" should be recognized upon his arrival, each narrator described him, as of report. He was lean and tall. He was dumpy and short. He wore sad, limp mustaches. He was clean-shaven and blue of jowl. He was given to much merriment. He was a stranger to laughter. But

"Old John" never emerged from the golden enchantment of distance in those times when twenty miles meant remoteness, and because he had failed them, they of the *Shield* office felt somehow that adventure had made an unwarrantable detour.

* * * *

The legend of "Old John," varying according to the narrator, but in each instance attributing most uncommon drollness to the character, reached its climax (and here there was never a disagreement) in his reputed method of quitting the job. It was said that "Old John" invariably announced his intention of resigning, and forthwith he resigned, while distributing type at the news case. As he distributed the dampened type, a tall tier of it gripped in his left hand, "Old John" would of a sudden be prey to wanderlust. An irresistible impulse would claim him. He must turn to the road again. At such times "Old John" did not trouble to finish the distribution of the type in hand, nor even to restore it to the imposing stone or brass galley. A nature less free and untrammeled might have responded to the promptings of duty. But "Old John," so the tramp printers vowed, would sweep his left hand over the case, with a gesture almost pontifical, the while a quarter-column of type tumbled hither and yon, as it must. "Get to your respective places!" he

would command the types. And then he would rise and take him thence.

It was sheer legend, though they believed in it far more piously than in any hope of salvation. A prank so mad, so lost to the obligations of craftsmanship, would never have entered the serious thought of any printer. Moreover, retribution must surely overtake the heretic. But they delighted to tell the story, with chucklings, and to bid all the country editors be on guard against "Old John." Perhaps, after all, they did not believe it. Yet they seemed to believe. It suited the rebel humor of them that mocked the smug small gods of citizens who never had been anywhere.

, , , ,

And they had an Isle of Avalon, as well, these tramp printers, of which they spoke in reverently hushed voices—and their account of this marvel, too, was always of report. None of them had been there. Had they unwarily drawn near to it they would have flushed like partridges at the clanking of its presses, in haste to give it as wide a berth as possible. But here again the raconteurs were not in agreement. The legend conformed to an always recognizable form and substance, but the locale was never twice the same. It was variously attributed to every part of the continent.

The tale itself is simply told. Their Isle of Avalon was the model of models—a country printing office perennially supplied with the newest types and the latest equipment; with fine, sturdy, shining presses, adequate stocks of choice paper, both for news and job printing, and all that these connote. There all needs of the journeyman printer were anticipated and supplied, and from that country printshop was issued a weekly publication perfect in its typography and of a flawless literary brilliancy. Thus far the story of Avalon might, with allowance for some enthusiasm, proceed in amity with the possible. With reason. The story was comely, of course, but scarcely more than this—up to that point. It staggered one only when the tramp printer telling the tale would asseverate that all the floors of this most remarkable establishment were richly covered with Brussels carpet! New Brussels carpet, fine enough for any mansion. Yes, sir, pressroom and all. Just think of it.

They had to be careful, naturally, with printer's ink in Avalon—but they were so preternaturally careful that as a matter of fact the resplendent carpet never was smudged nor blotched. In Avalon. And, mark this, too, in that sacrosanct office it was neither permitted to smoke nor to chew tobacco, and every man that worked there signed a pledge

to abstain from strong drink. In Avalon. The Brussels carpet, together with the conditions of employment, which were such as a noble nature could not brook, though it might admire at safe distance, may have accounted for the singular lack of first-hand report. They believed in their Isle of Avalon, where all the types and presses were new—but none of them wanted to work there.

And yet, in that restless, cynic way of theirs, they must have been looking for Avalon—and for the fullness of some vague and dilatory dream that receded languidly, keeping always its distance. There was plenty of time. There seemed more of time in those golden, heedless and unhurried afternoons than even the most exacting pilgrim could require. Time enough in which to cease from his migrating and to settle down. Somewhere. Time enough. Yes, plenty of time.

Chapter VIII

"I KNEW A TRAMP PRINTER ONCE—"

BUT they come no longer to country printing offices as was their wont—and those of us who knew them cannot believe they ever settled down. They come no longer to their tarryings, as in old times, that very often wrought a dearth of wrenches in the pressroom. For wrenches, when a tramp printer's frowsy pockets were empty, could be sold for small silver that would buy whisky. They do not come with their tall and sprightly tales of wonders in far parts, and so, of course, there are no empty vanilla bottles hidden under the washstand. They have vanished, so country editors testify, from the American scene.

The "boy tramp printer" who used to quote Burns by the half-hour, and who was a youth in his teens when he became fraternally famous for his very reasonable ambition to set type in every state in the Union, is a middle-aged insurance agent in Seattle

now. He was too late on the scene, you might say, and so he survived it. What renown was there in being a tramp printer when even the term itself was passing—with the horsefly, the livery stable and the rubber-tired sulky? It was a twilight of the lesser gods. Those auriferous afternoons waned and faded. There arose another generation, dissimilar, irreverent, mocking at distance and tradition, and, in life as in literature, deriding the prophets and paladins of yesteryear. Yea, a generation "which knew not Joseph." A generation, to put it baldly, that could not possibly have identified a horsefly if one had happened along.

The foregoing memories of tramp printers treat only, as properly they should, of that free and frequently redolent craftsman whose field of operation was the country town. The tramp compositor of the big city daily, with a tradition and method of his own—but who, alas, was given into oblivion by the insensate machine—was of another orbit and classification. Nor was he familiarly known to his contemporaneous America. He never, as you might say, really met the folks, and so could not become a national character of fact and fable, familiar to the villagers of every hamlet that boasted of a little weekly newspaper. The little home-town paper. He was not, in fine, the true tramp printer.

The Tramp Printer wouldn't know the old town if he were to return to it. The glory that was Odd Fellows' block has departed, and the town itself has moved over to the paved highway, which manifested an entire disregard for the convenience of the community. There is no longer a livery stable, and you cannot now identify a commercial traveler by mere appearance. Nobody has seen a horse-fly in years and years. No. The Tramp Printer would not know the old town now. Nor would the old town recognize him. He would seem stranger and less authentic than Rip Van Winkle.

Whither did the Tramp Printer betake himself when the old days were done? The country editors of the present shake their heads. They are without even the most vague information. All that they know of him is that he ceased from being—gradually and imperceptibly, but surely. They did not remark the decline of him, so casual was this leave-taking, until he came no more. And, truth to tell, they will confess to a trifle of loneliness now and then, while their smiles widen and their eyes are kindled to recollection. Then one of them will take up the tale.

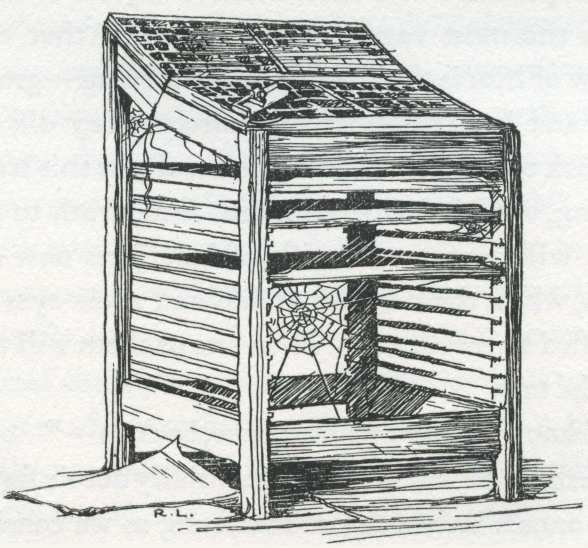
"I knew a tramp printer once, back in—"

Perhaps he was never an essentially heroic figure. His annals lacked the refinements, as we consider

them now, of preferable romance and the larger excitements of big-time drama. But in other days he was not without significance to the plot, with the country town for his stage and the weekly newspaper for his dingy backdrop. And, over all, the golden, indolent, and enchanted afternoon. Not romance? And no dramatic value? When he had achieved the incomparable curtain?

For the Tramp Printer has become a legend. There's a wreath for him. That's the final appraisal.

Here's your "30."



THE TRAMP PRINTER
was written by Ben Hur Lampman and first printed as a three-part serial in the *Sunday Oregonian* magazine section. Drawings by Ralph Lee, *Oregonian* staff artist. Produced by the following Craftsmen Syndicate members: Paul O. Giesey, Fred Dewey, Arthur Brock, Rudolph Ernst and Peter A. Binford. An edition of five hundred numbered copies was made, whereof this is
NUMBER
116